

Nearly half of those convicted of sharing explicit images of partners online show remorse

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In a new study, researchers found nearly half of those who share explicit images of others without permission feel remorse after the fact and 24% try to deflect blame onto victims. Amy Hasinoff, a researcher at the University of Colorado Denver, joined Danish researcher Sidsel K. Harder, to take a deeper dive into the issue of sexual abuse and image sharing.

Hasinoff and Harder looked at how people who shared explicit images online spoke to police officers about the harmful acts they committed. While looking over cases where the image-sharer was caught and convicted, researchers found nearly half, 44%, of those cases involved the guilty party acknowledging [sexual abuse](#), acknowledging shame, and telling redemption stories about making better choices in the future.

Deflecting Shame

In almost a quarter of all cases, people who committed image-based abuse assign the primary blame to the victim, consistent with the neutralization technique of denial of the victim. Denial of the victim is when the offender claims that the victim deserved what happened to them. The offender may justify the wrongdoing by saying that the victim was a bad person or deserved the abuse in some way.

"Sometimes, people choose to share sexual images of others without

their permission," said Hasinoff. "They do this specifically to cause harm, and sometimes they do it out of negligence and carelessness or because they think it doesn't matter or they feel entitled."

Narrating Redemption

While many of those convicted of non-consensual image sharing shift the blame to someone else, 44% show some sort of remorse and acknowledge that they committed harmful actions. These people all plead "guilty" and express that they were ashamed of what they have done as a result of their anger with the victims, their need for respect from male peers, or their carelessness.

"What is particularly striking about this study is that a group of people who've done something really abusive are able to manage their shame by transforming their [negative emotions](#) into redemption stories about their better future selves," said Hasinoff. "At the same time, telling a redemption story, apologizing, or expressing shame does not guarantee a victim's or a community's forgiveness."

A redemption story is when a person who's done something bad talks about how they plan to never repeat that in the future and can include trying to make amends too. In this case, making amends could include apologizing, paying for services to remove images from the internet, or other ways of making things right with the person they harmed.

Hasinoff points out there are limitations to any study on shame and remorse since you never know if it is sincere. At the same time, emotions are social, especially shame, meaning that we can only ever feel it in relation to other people, and so it always depends on context. Even when we feel shame on our own, in our own minds, without others present, [shame](#) is typically still about what we think others think about us.

Why is this significant?

According to researchers, rather than stigmatizing people who have shared images non-consensually, future interventions might focus on helping them accept the guilt for their actions, and future research might investigate how to create the best conditions for someone who has shared images without consent to acknowledge the harmfulness of what they have done.

"Instead of seeing everyone who shares a sexual image without permission as an irredeemable 'bad person' and just punishing them, it might be better for the victim if the person who committed this kind of harm could get some guidance and help to understand the effects of what they did and to try to find meaningful ways to repair that harm," said Hasinoff. "This is a society-wide problem that is rooted in gender norms—like the way some men feel entitled to treat women as sexual objects—so part of the solution has to be helping people understand why and how to unlearn those ideas."

More information: Sidsel K. Harder et al, Ashamed of shaming? Stories of managing, deflecting, and acknowledging shame after committing image-based sexual abuse, *First Monday* (2021). [DOI: 10.5210/fm.v26i4.11671](https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v26i4.11671)

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